TOWN OF BURGAW BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SPECIAL MEETING – STRATEGIC PLANNING RETREAT - DAY 1

DATE:	March 2, 2026
TIME:	9:00 AM
PLACE:	Burgaw Town Center, 108 E. Wilmington Street
BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:	Mayor Olivia Dawson, Mayor Pro-tem James Malloy, Commissioners Bill George, William Rivenbark, Michael Pearsall and Myra McDuffie

Call to Order

Mayor Olivia Dawson called the meeting to order at 9:02 AM on Monday morning, March 2, 2026.

Invocation

Mayor Pro-tem James Malloy led the invocation.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited following the invocation.

Manager Comments & Recap of Previous Year

Town Manager James Gantt appreciated everyone for attending and highlighted that the retreat was focused beyond budgeting, emphasizing, "this is also, like the mayor said, talking about the future of Burgaw." Reflecting on the past decade's achievements, he acknowledged, "We have done a whole lot, but now where do we go from here? And, where do we grow from here?" Gantt stated that the retreat aims to "align the operational reality, board priorities, the upcoming budget," tackling the balance of "realities, expectations, and priorities" without delving into specific numbers. Instead, the day concentrated on pinpointing needs and building a comprehensive plan. Gantt shared that he, Mayor Pro-tem Malloy, Mayor Dawson, Commissioner McDuffie, and Brianna Willman had participated in a strategic planning workshop weeks earlier, where they reviewed the town's progress and future priorities, recognizing that among the other jurisdictions, including those with 300 residents, "we were not in a bad place whatsoever."

Gantt explained that the retreat would focus on reviewing and updating strategic goals and objectives, mission and vision statements, and values. He emphasized that department heads would present on their priorities and goals, allowing the board to see how departmental needs align with board priorities for future planning.

The retreat's structure was designed to focus on strategy rather than individual projects, listening for themes, and planning for the future. Gantt outlined six key focus areas: reality, reflection, direction, prioritization, funding, and accountability. He stressed the importance of "govern intentionally and not reactively."

For the reality component, Gantt emphasized understanding the difference between expectations and what can actually be delivered, noting constraints from funding and state law requirements. "The state giveth and the state can take it away. So, they can they they're the ones that give us our power as a town, but they can also they're the ones that can take our power away." He presented a diagram showing "my plan," "real life," and "no plan," emphasizing the goal of avoiding the "no plan" scenario.

The retreat would listen for recurring challenges and operational bottlenecks, emerging risks and vulnerabilities, significant growth trends and market shifts, sustainability concerns, and capacity constraints. Gantt noted recent economic presentations showing Pender County's rapid growth, particularly on the east side, but also highlighting development between Rocky Point and Saint Helena and interest in Burgaw itself.

For reflection, Gantt explained they would conduct a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), with strengths and weaknesses being internal factors the organization could control, while opportunities and threats were external factors beyond direct control.

The direction component would involve defining mission, vision, and core values to set the organizational course. Gantt compared this to planning a road trip, noting "you have to have a destination to know where you're headed."

Strategic prioritization would focus on identifying the top 5-7 strategic priorities for the organization, concentrating on a clear 2-year horizon while also considering long-term planning. "Unfortunately, term priority is should be self explanatory, but if everything is a priority then it's not really a priority, prioritization."

The budget and funding alignment phase would come after establishing priorities, with Gantt noting they didn't yet have rebound numbers from the county tax office. The final component, accountability, would involve implementing quarterly progress reviews, defining measurable performance indicators, and ensuring transparent reporting through online dashboards and regular updates.

Gantt concluded by outlining what they hoped to accomplish: "a shared understanding of current operational reality, a clear and unified strategic direction for the future, well defined strategic priorities to guide our efforts, budget alignment that effectively supports our strategic goals, and a robust accountability framework for effective implementation."

Departmental Budget Presentations

Parks, Recreation & Tourism Department

Parks, Recreation & Tourism Director Cody Suggs began by noting his department's position as the first to present, joking "As the late great Ricky Bobby once said, if you ain't first, you're last." He introduced his team: Recreation Supervisor Jayna Augst, Recreation Coordinator David Poloway, and two part-time employees, Cindy Fontana and Eli Smith, who primarily assist with summer camp and small programs.

Suggs provided background on the department's qualifications, noting 20 years of combined public service experience, relevant degrees, and various certifications including National Recreation Board certification, certified playground safety inspectors, serve safe manager certificates for the incubator kitchen, and memberships in professional associations. The team had also received AED and basic life support training through the Burgaw Police Department.

Reviewing 2025 accomplishments, Suggs highlighted several major projects: breaking ground on phase 2 of the west side trail, opening the first dog park, resurfacing tennis courts and updating lighting at Harrell's Park through a USTA grant, launching the mural project, completing sidewalk and facade updates at Harold's and Hankins Park as part of the town's culvert project, establishing fitness equipment and parking at Ash Street Park through Eagle Scout collaboration, fundraising approximately $90,000 for the splash pad project, and completing numerous community landscaping projects.

Facility improvements included updating and encapsulating kitchen flooring at the train depot, opening the visitor center, and installing reservation boxes at parks to improve the rental process. For programs, the department brought on the recreation supervisor, hosted their first annual golf tournament, managed over 40 special events, handled 745 park and facility rentals, served 11,400 participants at special events, increased summer camp to 5 weeks, and served 5 active town boards with 36 total members.

Regarding capacity, Suggs reported the department was currently at capacity with 3 staff members. The town's parks system included 10 total parks with over 13 acres of green space, 4 miles of linear greenways, 55 playground and accessory pieces, 5 athletic sport courts, 1 off-leash canine facility, 4 restrooms, 4 entertainment facilities, 3 rental facilities, and 40+ special events annually.

Suggs noted that parks were at capacity for further development and growth, recommending future land acquisition. He explained that most parks either had floodways running through them or were constrained by spacing requirements for playground equipment to avoid congestion. Programs and events were increasing, and while the department recommended additional staffing in the medium to long term, they were currently managing well with part-time employees and volunteers.

All playground and accessory structures were in good condition with ongoing maintenance, and Suggs recommended implementing a medium to long-term replacement program for proactive maintenance rather than reactive replacement. He emphasized that with proper maintenance, playgrounds could last decades, citing examples of communities still using playgrounds from the 1980s and 1990s with regular component replacement.

Addressing emerging risks and challenges, Suggs identified growth as both an opportunity and a strain. "While growth can be a good thing, it can also be a strain on staff to most everything that the parks and rec provides is something that the community has asked for or something that the community wants." He noted that growth would require additional staffing and put strain on facilities maintenance, particularly affecting Chris's department with increased acreage and equipment to maintain.

Land acquisition emerged as a critical challenge. Suggs explained that finding suitable recreational space required careful consideration beyond just open fields, including soil samples and infrastructure connectivity. He noted the competitive environment, stating "Parks and recreation and municipality, we're 1 of the few departments that have a direct competitor. And when I say direct competitor, it's a private organization." He cited examples of private organizations building recreational facilities and the challenge of competing for land against residential developers.

Budget challenges included finding supplemental funds through grants, fundraising, bond executions requiring public votes, park fees in lieu of development requirements, and the ongoing strain on the general fund. Suggs emphasized his understanding of priorities: "I'm an advocate for parks and recreation. I always will be, but I fully understand the need for a fireman or a policeman before my own, right?"

For strategic opportunities, land acquisition remained the top priority, included in the capital improvement plan for the next 10 years. The department requested permission to apply for a dual PARTF grant application covering both pickleball courts and gazebo replacement at Harold Park, potentially saving taxpayer money by using state funding rather than general fund resources.

The splash pad project had various options under development, and Suggs requested a joint meeting between the town board and the parks foundation to discuss execution strategies. The department also proposed implementing a 20% fee increase for nonresidents participating in programs, based on Parks and Recreation Advisory Board research showing significant participation from outside Burgaw. This would address situations where residents were being waitlisted while non-residents accessed services funded by Burgaw taxpayers.

Specific 2026 budget requests included paving at Hankins Park from the concrete apron to the stop sign, addressing broken asphalt and ADA compliance while preparing for the splash pad installation. The department also requested increased operational budget for a part-time employee position, as Recreation Supervisor Jayna would transition to part-time status after maternity leave. The Blueberry Festival proposed paying the town $10,000 annually to reimburse for this shared part-time position.

Additional capital requests included portable stage replacement due to the aging and deteriorating current stage, with discussion of partnering with other organizations to share costs. Train depot bench replacement was also requested, replacing wooden benches affected by carpenter bees and wear with powder-coated steel benches matching the downtown aesthetic.

Commissioner discussion revealed ongoing interest in the former Buccaneer property for parks expansion. Commissioner William Rivenbark emphasized this location's potential: "That would be the best place for us to extend our parks and rec… there's a lot of stuff that can be done over here." Mayor Dawson confirmed previous discussions with the property owner, noting he was open to selling but hadn't provided a price. The property's development restrictions due to wetlands made it more suitable for recreational use.

Town Manager Gantt noted the property's potential for stormwater management, referencing the 2015 stormwater master plan's recommendation for a 5-acre retention pond that could serve dual purposes for stormwater and recreation. The land and water conservation grant program had increased matching funds to $750,000, potentially providing over $1 million in funding for such projects.

Discussion also touched on potential partnerships with Pender High School for gazebo construction and the importance of strategic land acquisition before development pressure increased further.

Public Services Department

Public Services Director Chris Medlin began by outlining his department's mission: "The Town of Burgaw Public Services Department strives to provide a safe, clean, healthy, and inviting environment for both citizens and visitors. The department is committed to provide superior public infrastructure and services to protect and enhance the quality of life for the people of Burgaw."

For water and sewer operations in 2025, the department successfully operated systems with no Notice of Violations (NOVs) or sanitary sewer overflows from the state, completed the lead service line inventory well ahead of state and federal deadlines, replaced approximately 500 linear feet of old clay sewer main with new PVC along South Smith Street, and provided extensive training for staff, including Utility Technician Jeff Coenen receiving his distribution certification.

Streets, drainage, sanitation, and garage operations included replacing multiple downtown sidewalk sections, resurfacing about 4,200 linear feet of town streets, installing a new vehicle lift in the garage, and beginning the stormwater inventory project, which was nearing completion.

Facilities and grounds accomplishments included renovating the town hall lobby and the building inspection office in the old jail, along with numerous other facility projects.

Medlin described increasing service demands across all areas, from yard debris collection to building infrastructure capacity. Aging infrastructure presented ongoing challenges, with water mains containing lead joints beginning to leak more frequently, and storm drainage pipes designed 60 years ago struggling with changing climate conditions. Building infrastructure including HVAC units and roofs required continuous attention, along with ever-changing regulatory requirements including lead service lines, PFAS regulations, and potential fluoride removal requirements.

Growth presented the most imminent challenge, with significant impact expected on both public services and town infrastructure. While new subdivisions would have new internal piping installed by contractors, the existing pipes supplying and receiving the increased usage remained old and stressed.

Regarding staffing sustainability, the department was fully staffed except for a heavy equipment operator position, though an employee was making progress toward filling that role. Current staffing was adequate for day-to-day operations but struggled with proactive maintenance, operating more as a "repair than replace type system" without sufficient staff for implementing new proactive maintenance programs.

For immediate policy and process improvements, Medlin proposed restructuring to develop better work systems with people assigned to specific tasks rather than everyone responding to whatever crisis emerged. A key request involved establishing a yard debris and white goods pickup schedule, noting that current operations ran the grapple truck five days per week, potentially visiting the same streets daily for minimal debris.

Medlin's proposed schedule included debris pickup on Mondays and Fridays to capture weekend and weekday yard work, white goods pickup on Wednesdays aligning with regular trash pickup, and dedicating Tuesdays and Thursdays to street sweeping once the ordered street sweeper arrived. This would also provide time for proper equipment maintenance, as the knuckle boom truck ran constantly without adequate servicing.

Medium-term staffing adjustments would be needed as growth occurred, with infrastructure expansion requirements extending beyond public services to include building needs for growing staff. "They're already busting at the seams" regarding current building capacity.

Capital investments would be continuous, with appropriated funds and upcoming water and wastewater master plans providing detailed roadmaps for water and wastewater infrastructure, though other infrastructure needs would require separate planning.

Budget drivers focused heavily on proactive maintenance programs, including well maintenance and inspection. Wells built in the 1970s had never had documented inspections of downhole components. Medlin showed dramatic before-and-after photos of a 10-year-old well, demonstrating how cleaning significantly improved water quality and quantity. The department requested implementing 5-year well inspection cycles, examining one well annually with periodic breaks in the rotation.

Street assessment inventory was another priority, moving beyond simply identifying streets needing repaving to understanding preventive maintenance options. "In an ideal situation, you don't let your streets get to where they need to be repaved. As technology increases, there's several programs you can do before they reach that level to increase the age of the street."

Building assessment inventory would cover all HVAC units and roofs, with the train depot alone having 10 different HVAC units from 2010 or older, all approaching or exceeding the 15-20 year commercial expectancy. Rather than waiting for emergency replacements, a rotational replacement program could provide better budget management and avoid multiple simultaneous failures.

Continuous pricing increases affected all materials and equipment, with Medlin noting that trucks costing $325,000 five years ago now cost $650,000 for the same specifications.

During discussion, Commissioner Rivenbark expressed concern about the lack of well inspection records, asking "Do we not have regulations from the state on how often that's supposed to be done?" Medlin confirmed no state regulations existed for downhole inspections, though annual surface inspections were required. He emphasized that water quality remained safe, but proactive maintenance would ensure continued reliability and capacity.

Commissioner McDuffie inquired about the heavy equipment operator training progress. Medlin explained that the employee showed initiative, staying after hours to practice on equipment, and that cross-training all staff was a priority given the small department size. He preferred promoting from within, noting it was easier to hire unskilled labor than skilled labor.

Discussion included Mayor Pro-tem Malloy's strong support for internal training and cross-training: "I'm a firm believer that there should be in house training. There should always be the next man up. And everybody in public work should be cross trained." He noted this approach had been lacking previously but was now being implemented effectively.

Commissioner Rivenbark supported Medlin's proposed scheduling approach, suggesting the department establish and communicate the schedule to residents. Medlin outlined his preferred Monday/Friday debris pickup, Wednesday white goods pickup, and Tuesday/Thursday street sweeping schedule, which would also provide needed equipment maintenance time.

Mayor Dawson agreed with the scheduling proposal, noting it would help residents understand service timing rather than expecting daily pickup. Medlin added that the structured approach would reduce inefficient multiple daily trips to the same areas and allow for proper vehicle maintenance.

The discussion confirmed the department's request for valve installation funding, with ongoing efforts to secure grant funding or low-interest loans to accelerate the process. Medlin noted they currently installed about 5 insertion valves annually and were actively pursuing funding to speed implementation.

Building Code Administration Department

Building Code Administrator Louis Hesse provided a brief overview, noting his department's unique position of being economically self-sustaining.

Hesse reviewed the department's evolution from a one-person operation when he arrived, when he and Kim Rivenbark handled diverse responsibilities including purchasing and installing lights for magnolia trees and building a fence for the Christmas tree. The department had grown as the town transitioned from slower development to rapid growth, allowing them to focus more on core building inspection responsibilities.

The department continued handling flood development administration and working with public works on various projects, while maintaining their primary building inspection functions. One significant challenge involved their iWorks software system, which had failed to deliver promised functionality for contractor portals and other features. "A lot of things that were promised us when we purchased the thing did not materialize." The department had abandoned the portal entirely due to problems and was transitioning to new software under Town Manager Gantt's guidance.

Hesse noted they had switched software systems multiple times previously, always accompanied by data loss and operational challenges. The new system provider had acknowledged difficulties extracting data from iWorks, though IT Director Dustin was working to preserve as much information as possible.

For future growth needs, the current team was positioned to handle anticipated development smoothly without requiring additional inspectors. However, if growth exceeded expectations, the increased revenue would support hiring additional staff as needed.

Current major projects demonstrated the department's capacity and revenue generation. The Health and Human Services building, an 87,000 square foot facility with an IBC valuation over $22 million, generated $175,000 in permit fees. The department had invested approximately 1,500 hours across 253 inspections ranging from 30 minutes to 3 hours each.

The Law Enforcement Center, a 99,000 square foot building with a $28 million IBC valuation and $176,000 in permit fees, was about six months from completion with an October target. This project had required approximately 3,500 hours across 581 inspections in just over a year.

The department had processed 424 total permits in the previous year across all categories (mechanical, electrical, gas, building) and conducted 2,200 total inspections including the major projects.

Budget requirements remained stable with no significant increases requested beyond continuation education opportunities for inspectors. The department's operational budget outside of salaries and vehicle leases totaled only $14,000-15,000 for items under their direct control.

The department maintained responsibility for minimum housing enforcement, achieving good success rates while working sensitively with property owners experiencing legitimate hardships. Hesse preferred addressing specific properties in individual discussions rather than public meetings to respect property owners' privacy.

Future reorganization plans included eventually transferring flood development responsibilities to planning for front-end review, and moving water/sewer connection tracking to public works once new software systems facilitated easier group management rather than individual tracking.

During discussion, Commissioner discussion touched on specific minimum housing cases, with Hesse confirming progress on various properties while maintaining his policy of respectful, private communication with property owners. He offered to provide detailed updates in individual meetings with commissioners who had specific concerns.

Town Manager Gantt reminded the board that the large new county buildings generate no property tax revenue for the town, only permit fees and utility connection fees, making the permit revenue particularly important for the municipal budget.

Planning Department

Planning Director Ron Meredith began by noting the department's staffing adjustment, shifting half of Brianna’s position fully to planning as a Planning Technician, allowing the department to focus more effectively on core priorities.

Major 2025 accomplishments included nearing completion of the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) rewrite, working with consultants on the rain garden grant through the RCCP DEQ grant applied for several years prior, and collaborating with NCDOT on multimodal grants to update the existing sidewalk plan. The NCDOT grant required only a 10% local match and focused on areas where facilities were not equitable.

Planning board participation remained solid, though public attendance at meetings was extremely low. New permitting software was planned for spring 2026, requiring staff updates and application modifications.

Current challenges included lean staffing that limited flexibility during peak development periods or large projects. Development activity was increasing significantly, placing additional demands on staff, while complex state regulations added administrative workload and highlighted the need for modernization and more efficient processes.

The outdated software systems hindered interdepartmental communications, though new software updates were expected to provide significant improvements. The department was monitoring state general statutes to determine optimal timing for bringing the completed UDO to the board for approval.

Key ongoing challenges included managing growth pressure as residential and commercial applications increased, limited staff reducing flexibility during busy periods, outdated technology limiting efficiency, a comprehensive plan that no longer fully reflected current growth trends, UDO modernization needs, and legacy zoning and compliance issues requiring careful review and consistent enforcement.

Immediate priorities focused on finalizing and modernizing the UDO for clarity and legal alignment, implementing modern permitting software to improve efficiency and customer service, and updating the comprehensive land use plan to guide long-term growth infrastructure and policy decisions.

Major cost drivers for fiscal year 2026 included initiating comprehensive plan updates, with costs covering upfront implementation for professional services, plan and ordinance updates, and necessary training and compliance expenses. No new staff were requested for the current year, though continued growth and development activity might require additional support in the future.

Meredith emphasized that delaying modernization could strain operations and staff capacity, noting that these initiatives aligned with the town's strategic goals for responsible growth, operational efficiency, and fiscal stewardship.

The most significant portion of Meredith's presentation revealed the scope of approved development projects. The chart showed 968 approved housing units across various developments, combining single-family homes and condos. This figure did not include a recent 75-unit submittal or discussions regarding another potential 143-unit development.

Comparing this to current population estimates, Meredith noted that while the US Census showed population around 3,000, realistic estimates suggested closer to 3,700 with approximately 1,200-1,400 rooftops. The approved development represented a potential doubling of the town's housing stock, with major percentage increases in both rooftops and population expected over the next 2-5 years.

Meredith warned that some major developers were likely to move quickly, meaning "it could hit hard and fast." Mayor Dawson expressed concern about the rapid growth timeline, suggesting the town could see population increases of 2,000-3,000 people within 2-3 years.

The development map showed concentration along the newer sewer easement and recent approvals, including some projects that had been approved pre-COVID but were now reexamining density and costs due to increased construction prices.

Despite the anticipated workload increase, Meredith felt comfortable with current staffing levels, appreciating the recent position shift into his department. However, he acknowledged uncertainty about future needs as new development applications and departmental adjustments materialized.

The presentation concluded with Meredith noting that the development growth projection would impact budget requests across all departments, as the dramatic growth figures demonstrated the scale of service expansion challenges facing the entire municipal organization.

Information Technology Department

IT Director Dustin McCullen began by emphasizing that "basically, everything that the IT department does and all the technology that we use is to support other departments and their efficiencies. And then that overall supports the goals, and mission of the town."

McCullen outlined technology's importance in local government: improving service delivery, enhancing transparency, improving cost efficiency, supporting citizen engagement and public safety communication, and ensuring security and privacy of municipal data.

For fiscal year 2025 tech support metrics, the IT department had established better tracking systems for technical support activities, providing a repository for past service issues and identifying technology infrastructure shortcomings. From July 2025 through the meeting date, McCullen had worked approximately 330 completed support requests, averaging 41 tickets per month, though he emphasized this represented only a small fraction of the IT department's total responsibilities.

Operational improvements in 2025 included adding equipment to improve network performance, overhauling network design for better office connectivity, upgrading police department laptops as an ongoing annual project, increasing internet speeds by ten times previous capacity, and moving the police department to a cloud-hosted video evidence library. All improvements aimed to "enhance reliability, speed, and security of the town's network infrastructure and ensure that we have a 99.9 percent uptime for those networks."

Significant completed projects included dark fiber installation, which McCullen described as "absolutely wonderful." This project allowed the town to switch internet service providers for increased speeds while, more importantly, connecting town offices with a private fiber connection. Previously, the town relied on VPN connections that were "unstable, unreliable, less secure." The dark fiber provided full control over building connectivity and flexibility for future expansion.

Another major project involved replacing the outdated time tracking system and physical time clocks in collaboration with finance and human resources departments. The previous system and 7-year-old time clocks had been well overdue for replacement, with the new system providing faster, easier functionality for staff managing employee time.

Ongoing projects included continued police department laptop replacements to ensure current technology for equipment that "get banged around a lot" and "are used and abused." Phone system replacement was underway as current systems approached end of service life, with the new system integrating phones, door access control modules, and security cameras for improved safety and security.

Expanded door access controls would add access control to locations currently lacking them while replacing existing controllers with the newer unified system for better integration and expansion capabilities. This system would ensure regulatory compliance and enhance staff safety.

Townwide camera expansion focused on public safety, building on the newer integrated system foundation and expanding capabilities to areas currently lacking coverage. Advanced features included license plate readers and AI technologies to help police locate wanted subjects or vehicles faster than current capabilities allowed.

Service enhancements included mass communication software replacement due to security issues with the previous system. The new system would provide text, email, and phone call capabilities with multiple contact options, enhanced staff communication features, public and employee apps, and geofencing capabilities to send location-specific communications.

SeeClickFix integration with the town website would allow citizen feedback and streamlined issue reporting processes.

Addressing staffing and service levels, McCullen noted operating as a one-person department established less than two years prior. His responsibilities included daily technical support for all departments, after-hours emergency response, project management, departmental administrative tasks, and IT administrative tasks including system maintenance, server updates, and more. While currently manageable, future growth would likely require additional support staff to allow concentration on higher-level administrative and technical tasks.

Service demand trends showed uptick from the typical 35-40 tickets monthly to 60-65 tickets in recent months, which McCullen attributed to aging equipment conditions requiring increased support.

Equipment assessment revealed concerning conditions across multiple categories. Network equipment, while functional, was aging with core switches over 4 years old approaching the 5-6 year replacement threshold. Aging equipment risks included increased failure likelihood causing service outages, staff duty disruptions, communication loss, and potential security risks as manufacturers discontinued security patches and updates.

Phone systems were over 8 years old, exceeding the typical 5-10 year voice over IP service life, carrying similar risks of failure, duty disruption, and communication loss.

Servers were functional but aging, with critical roles in user login capabilities and application operation. Microsoft supported only 10-year lifecycles with 5 years mainstream and 5 years extended support. A particular vulnerability existed with only one domain controller managing network services, user access, and file permissions, when best practices required at least two domain controllers.

Laptop conditions varied from functional to "getting to the point of loss of function" with keyboard failures requiring external keyboards, monitor failures, and frequent battery replacements. McCullen had replaced 8-10 laptop batteries in the past year and a half. Approximately 60 total computers served the town, with almost half reaching 5-6 year end of service life.

Rising costs presented ongoing challenges, with software subscriptions increasing 5-10% annually and component shortages causing equipment price increases, particularly over the past 6-12 months. Dell representative had reported their largest quarter-to-quarter price increase in years, significantly impacting replacement budgets.

Compliance requirements added complexity through PCI compliance governing credit card acceptance, CJIS compliance for criminal justice information systems, National Defense Authorization Act restricting technology brands from certain regions, and ADA compliance for website accessibility.

Security pressures continued mounting with daily new threats. FBI statistics showed government agencies as the third most targeted sector for ransomware attacks, with federal agencies reporting over 32,000 information security incidents in fiscal year 2023. At least 44 US states reported cyber incidents affecting local government systems in the first 10 months of 2025.

Regional impacts included nearly a dozen South Carolina local government offices breached in 2025, local government agencies with ongoing billing system disruptions, and local county and town governments losing over $1 million through cyber incidents in late 2025.

McCullen disclosed that in late 2024, the Department of Homeland Security had notified the town that one of their public IP addresses was a known target in an international campaign. While no evidence suggested successful breach or attack, the vulnerability was specific to old firewall types since replaced, and the public IP address had been changed as a precautionary measure.

Capital improvement opportunities focused on systems maintenance through a rolling CIP addressing core network equipment replacement, adding a second domain controller to reduce risk, adding firewall failover capabilities, expanding network security capabilities including email security, expanding technology services, and maintaining spare equipment for emergency replacements.

Computer replacement planning aimed to establish proactive replacement programs outside the existing police department CIP. With half the town's computers past service life due to previous simultaneous replacement through COVID funding, McCullen requested establishing annual replacement of 5-6 computers to avoid future mass replacement scenarios.

Server infrastructure updates were pushed to the following year pending decisions by other departments that might affect server requirements.

During discussion, Mayor Dawson asked for clarification about domain controllers, with Town Manager Gantt explaining that domain controllers were servers managing user access to all systems, controlling login authentication. McCullen emphasized redundancy importance, noting hardware failure risks with single domain controller operation.

Regarding cybersecurity protection, McCullen confirmed significant security improvements over the past two years including firewall replacements of antiquated 10-year-old systems. He noted countless security policy changes, VLAN expansions, and infrastructure improvements, though emphasized that complete threat elimination was impossible as "threats evolve every single day."

Town Manager Gantt highlighted that "your biggest threat to the security is your people" through employee education needs, citing frequent direct deposit change scam attempts. McCullen confirmed receiving thousands of spam and phishing attempts over six-month periods, with most filtered before reaching staff, but noted this represented only a fraction of total security threats.

Commissioner George inquired about timeline and equipment needs for maintaining safety. McCullen explained this was an ongoing daily process, confirming firewall improvements but noting the need to replace aging computers as they lost manufacturer support. He distinguished between physical component failure affecting staff usability versus security risks, noting that computers running Windows 11 remained relatively secure even with aging hardware.

Discussion covered backup systems, with McCullen confirming nightly incremental server backups to cloud storage across multiple data centers in different regions. Individual computers weren't backed up to the same service, but he configured new computers with Microsoft Office 365 OneDrive integration to automatically sync critical folders to cloud storage.

Commissioner questions about computer replacement revealed the police department's existing $20,000 annual CIP for rolling laptop replacement, which had decreased from 8 computers to 7 computers annually due to rising prices. McCullen estimated approximately 20 non-police computers of the 60 total had reached end of service life, requiring separate replacement planning.

The meeting concluded with light discussion about technological evolution and AI capabilities, with McCullen noting the camera system's AI features would process locally without external data transfer, maintaining network control while providing advanced search and identification capabilities.

Fire Department Presentation

2025 Year in Review

Chief Prevatte reported that the fire department responded to 877 calls in 2025, showing the breakdown of response types. The department added seven new volunteers, including three junior firefighters, and hired six new full-time staff and two part-time staff funded through the SAFR grant. Combined with the AFG grant, these federal grants brought approximately $1 million in funding to address departmental needs.

The department completed installation of the Plymo Vent System, funded through the AFG grant. Community engagement became a major priority, with 138 documented hours of community engagement events during 2025. Chief Prevatte emphasized this didn't include informal interactions when crews encountered children or provided impromptu station tours.

Social media efforts significantly increased engagement, with 2.6 million views during 2025, a 50% increase in conversations with the community, 122% increase in overall engagement, and nearly 50% increase in total followers. Chief Prevatte noted that their social media presence helps with safety messaging, recruitment efforts, and community relationship building, with their "how-to" content being particularly popular.

Training and Development

The department saw exponential increases in volunteer participation and training during 2025. With the seven new volunteers, at least three days per week now have volunteer coverage, with some volunteers pulling 24-hour or even 48-hour duty shifts. Part-time staffing requirements mandate a minimum of four shifts per month.

Major projects included comprehensive hydrant testing requested by the engineering firm working on the water-sewer master plan. Crews tested approximately 500 hydrants throughout the town and Pender Central area. They also completed regular hose testing to return to an annual rotation schedule and conducted an ISO consultation.

Current Capacity and Staffing

The department currently has 12 full-time personnel, 5 part-time staff, and 17 volunteers, including junior firefighters. Chief Prevatte explained that junior firefighters have limited functions on the fire ground per North Carolina regulations but provide valuable community engagement and potential future career development opportunities.

He referenced NFPA standards, noting the transition from NFPA 1720 to the consolidated NFPA 1750 standard. The department has experienced consistent call volume increases over the past four years, which Chief Prevatte expects to continue growing exponentially with anticipated community growth.

Emerging Challenges and Risks

Chief Prevatte identified capital replacement needs as the most significant challenge, acknowledging that fire department equipment typically carries the highest price tags among all departments. He discussed increased service expectations with the planned transition from first responder to basic life support (BLS) agency, which would allow response to more medical calls and provide quicker emergency personnel deployment for medical emergencies.

The department is working toward medium rescue certification, with BLS certification anticipated before the end of the calendar year and medium rescue certification potentially by year-end, though personnel certification requirements may present challenges.

Regarding staffing, the department currently meets minimum NFPA 1750 standards for engine company staffing with four personnel. However, the standard recommends the first arriving resource arrive within four minutes with at least four personnel, and the second arriving resource within six minutes. While mutual aid agreements provide additional resources, the likelihood of meeting the six-minute window is poor due to travel distances.

Chief Prevatte warned that lack of proactive actions could lead to apparatus unavailability. Ladder 15 has required nearly $100,000 in repairs over the past 2-2.5 years due to its age and the complexity of hydraulic systems for outriggers, aerial operations, and pump systems. "That there was no way to get around it, they had to be made, we had to have that truck in service. We actually just got that truck back from the most recent repair this past Thursday."

The department's extrication equipment is becoming obsolete, with service technicians warning that parts may become unavailable within a couple of years. Additionally, Pender EMS and Fire's Rescue 1 is not consistently in service, sometimes operating only one-third to two-thirds of the time, and personnel may be reassigned to tanker operations depending on call type.

Chief Prevatte emphasized the department's philosophy of self-reliance: "Us placing a priority and a focus of being able to stand on our own two feet and take care of our own." He expressed concern that without addressing equipment and facility needs, employee morale could decline, potentially leading to less engaged employees who don't feel adequately equipped to perform to their full capacity.

Strategic Needs and Public Safety Training Center

The most significant request was for a Public Safety Training Center, a joint initiative between the fire and police departments. Chief Prevatte explained that both command staffs had collaborated on this proposal, envisioning it as an investment not just in public safety but in the entire community.

The training center would include a multi-story training building certified to NFPA 1402 standards for fire service training buildings. It would provide forceful entry areas, live fire training capabilities, technical rescue anchors, and spaces for police to practice room clearing and building searches. The police department specifically requested a 100-yard range for rifle training beyond pistols.

A classroom building was also proposed, similar to one recently opened by Duplin County, sourced from Superior Metal Structures to meet needs without being extravagant.

Chief Prevatte emphasized the community investment aspect: "if we had this facility it would open both agencies up to not only do more in house training and development and specifically with the fire department for us to run more of the certification training that were already approved run through the state. We just lack the facilities to be able to do it, but it would also allow us to host regional trainings."

Regional trainings would bring instructors and participants from across the state and country, benefiting local businesses through increased foot traffic, dining, and overnight stays. Participants might return with families for festivals or events, creating ongoing economic impact.

The training facility would also help reduce the town's ISO rating, as referenced by their ISO consultant as necessary for improving training component scores and reducing insurance rates for property owners.

Equipment and Capital Needs

Immediate needs include the Public Safety Training Center and extrication/rescue equipment, both eligible for grant funding and potentially state legislative assistance. A grant opportunity opens April 2nd that could address extrication equipment needs.

Midterm needs include a secondary fire station (estimated $2-2.5 million), Ladder 15 replacement (approximately $1.75-2.5 million), and SCBA and cascade system replacement ($350,000-400,000).

Chief Prevatte explained SCBA (Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus) requirements for IDLH (Immediately Dangerous to Life and Health) environments including structure fires, gas leaks, carbon monoxide alarms, and hazardous materials incidents. The department currently has 21-22 air packs with two cylinders each, allowing firefighters to swap cylinders and continue working.

The SCBA replacement quote requests up to 30 air packs and 60 cylinders to accommodate the new Engine 15, training needs, and repairs without reducing operational capacity. Current SCBAs are approaching 10 years old (MSA recommends 10-15 year replacement), with several already at 10 years and others reaching that age in 2027.

Commissioner McDuffie asked about cylinder refillability, and Chief Prevatte explained the in-house cascade system for refilling 4,500 PSI cylinders, with hydrostatic testing required every five years. The department is considering 5,500 PSI quick-connect cylinders for faster emergency air supply to downed firefighters.

Long-term needs include increasing staffing, apparatus and equipment replacement (brush truck and others), and ongoing turnout gear replacement. Chief Prevatte noted he forgot to mention continued large diameter hose replacement needs for several more years to eliminate failing hose and equipment that doesn't meet current safety requirements.

Budget Summary

Major budget drivers include the approved new Engine 15, the Public Safety Training Center request, and extrication/rescue equipment. Chief Prevatte acknowledged that costs will inevitably increase if projects are delayed, noting he cannot control pricing and these items represent significant investments.

Grant funding will be pursued for extrication/rescue equipment and training center funding, with midterm items like SCBA replacement sought through operational budget and grant combinations. Additional equipment needing replacement includes gas monitors and thermal imaging cameras.

Chief Prevatte concluded by emphasizing the department's commitment to being good stewards of taxpayer funds while ensuring adequate resources to serve citizens and prepare for growth: "We deliver the requests and initiatives. We think that they align with the strategic direction of the town and it will maintain Burgaw as a great place to live, work, and play."

Police Department Presentation

Police Chief James Rowell began his presentation noting the consistent themes of growth challenges across all departments and acknowledging his senior staff's first participation in the budget process. He brought Captain Williams, Sergeant Kennedy, and Sergeant Padgett to observe and learn about the town's decision-making processes.

2025 Accomplishments

The police department navigated significant leadership transitions with both the chief and number-two administrator leaving, requiring internal promotions and advancement. Chief Rowell noted growing pains as staff adapted to new responsibilities and roles they had never experienced.

The department undertook rebranding from red to blue striping, returning to traditional police colors and supporting the town's blueberry theme. When Chief Rowell arrived, nobody could remember the origin of the red stripe design.

Major equipment replacements included new AEDs (Automated External Defibrillators) after more than 10 years of service, and complete taser replacement with Taser 7 technology through a five-year financing program. The department replaced canine Cane with Omen, now certified in narcotics detection, obedience, apprehension, and article searches - marking the first time the agency had an apprehension canine.

Vehicle operations included completing two new vehicles (detective and canine vehicles) while retiring three vehicles. The 23-vehicle fleet drove approximately 250,000 miles total, averaging about 15,000 miles per vehicle annually. The department completed 2,717 incident reports and answered 6,567 total calls with 17 personnel.

Chief Rowell emphasized potential call volume doubling if population growth projections materialize: "if we follow suit just adding 2 or 3 people per household you know if all of these different things go through we're going to be looking at doubling almost doubling the size of the town in the next couple years, population wise."

The department provided equivalent of 34 officers to 13 different mutual aid events including Surf City Fireworks, summer camps, UNCW move-in, Pender High Homecoming, Tops of Autumn Fest, Safe Haven Vigil Walk, career days, and saturation patrols.

Patrol shift restructuring moved to one-month rotations instead of two-week changes, improving officers' circadian rhythms and sleep patterns compared to the previous daily rotation system.

Current Challenges and Staffing

The department operates one position short since Detective Vann's promotion left a patrol vacancy. Despite advertising, recruitment challenges persist partly due to being the county's lowest-paying agency. Chief Rowell emphasized his responsibility to recruit "the best and the brightest talent to the town."

He compared the situation to hurricane preparation: "We're all well aware of dealing with hurricanes and you see that hurricane out 2 or 3 days out, 4 days ahead of time and we're trying to figure out is it going to be a direct hit, is it going be a 3, is it going be a 4, is it going be a 5. That's what we're all doing right now trying to look at this this storm that's on the forefront coming to us with the we know the town's going grow it's just going be to what extent and how fast."

As a small agency lacking specialized units like SWAT or marine divisions, recruitment and retention require creative approaches and competitive benefits. Chief Rowell noted that while young officers initially want patrol experience, interest wanes over time without advancement opportunities.

Current staffing maintains two officers per shift without consistent supervisory presence. Chief Rowell expressed concern about inexperienced officers making decisions that supervisors should handle, potentially developing poor habits. "when you don't know what you don't know, you don't know that you're wrong and so, I don't want young officers doing something unbeknownst that it, you know, a safer better way to do it."

Infrastructure and Technology Limitations

The police department has reached capacity in its current facility, lacking adequate evidence storage separation for drugs, money, and firearms. Chief Rowell noted this was the seventh year the police department improvement project appeared in the Capital Improvement Plan, with approval but no secured funding.

Technology limitations significantly impact operations. Officers cannot access dispatch computer information that other agencies routinely use. "Our records management system is one step better than pen and paper," Chief Rowell explained. Officers must obtain information from dispatch in hard copy, then manually enter it into their separate system.

The county's records management system could integrate with dispatch systems, allowing officers to access information directly and transfer data electronically. This technological gap affects officer safety and efficiency, requiring divided attention between paperwork and surroundings.

Chief Rowell emphasized that officers communicate across agencies and compare available technology, influencing career decisions. "Everybody knows who has what technology at their agencies, and that's why people make decisions on where they go to work."

Growth Impact and Staffing Needs

Currently staffed at 4.2 officers per 1,000 residents, the department exceeds typical rural southeastern averages of 2.8 to 3.0 officers per 1,000. However, anticipated growth threatens this ratio without proactive staffing increases.

Chief Rowell stressed equipment adequacy but emphasized technology improvement needs for recruitment. "If y'all gave me 20 positions and said, chief, go fill them. The positions are no good if I can't get people to come here."

Young officers seek competitive salaries for retirement planning, and small departments face sustainability challenges with limited advancement opportunities. As call volume increases with growth, additional street-level positions become necessary rather than specialized roles.

The chief advocated for adding a third officer position with supervisory capability, noting that ideally "you want to have more good guys than you do bad guys on a scene." With only two officers working and simultaneous calls, officer safety becomes compromised.

Strategic Needs and Policy Changes

Chief Rowell proposed career path development allowing officers to specialize and receive financial rewards for expertise. For example, an officer specializing in traffic enforcement and collision reconstruction could earn additional compensation similar to supervisory pay.

He noted that until recently, Burgaw was the only local agency rewarding education and certification advancement, but Pender County has increased their competitive position with education incentives and SWAT team bonuses. Surf City and Topsail Beach offer higher starting salaries, with Topsail around $54,000.

Budget Drivers and Proposed Initiatives

The department has historically received 1-3 new vehicles annually, maintaining a sustainable fleet with most high-mileage vehicles around 40,000 miles compared to other agencies running vehicles to 150,000+ miles.

Chief Rowell proposed CAD (Computer-Aided Dispatch) improvements, noting officers currently rely on cell phones to verify dispatch information due to radio clarity issues. "this is 2026. We need to have equipment that our folks can go to the job safely and, and do it to the best of their ability."

Additional proposals included gym memberships and PBA (Police Benevolent Association) dues to provide legal protection and benefits that differentiate Burgaw from surrounding agencies.

The department showcased their rebranding with a new blue-striped patrol vehicle featuring black wheels and chrome center caps, representing their return to traditional police aesthetics.

Technology Integration Discussion

Town Manager Gantt confirmed he had already directed Chief Rowell to obtain quotes for CAD system upgrades and full RMS (Records Management System) replacement. Gantt explained the county's transition to Central Square Technology's Zucker system and the town's efforts to integrate virtually with both county dispatch and town hall systems.

Commissioner Pearsall inquired about system compatibility and training requirements. Chief Rowell explained that modern systems include training portals and on-site instruction, noting his ability to adapt from handwritten cards to computer systems throughout his career.

The conversion process would require archiving existing data into the new system, with costs theoretically lower for the smaller agency compared to the county's implementation. Chief Rowell emphasized pursuing wise changes while addressing officer complaints about technological limitations.

Regarding system longevity, Chief Rowell noted Central Square Technology has acquired many smaller competitors and offers cloud-based options potentially saving money compared to server-based systems. The department would participate in future county system decisions if they integrate platforms.

Commissioner George supported moving forward with upgrades, while Commissioner McDuffie emphasized the need to return to the board for funding discussions on major projects.

Police Department Expansion Project

Town Manager Gantt clarified that the police department expansion project remains under consideration, with Chief Rowell's needs assessment differing somewhat from previous Chief Hock's vision. Gantt and Chief Rowell plan to collaborate on RFQ development and design work to establish accurate cost estimates before proceeding.

Mission and Vision Statement Review

Following extensive departmental presentations, Town Manager Gantt transitioned to strategic planning exercises addressing mission and vision statement review, SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats), and core values development.

Mission Statement Discussion

Gantt presented the current mission statement developed around 2019-2020: "Through every action provide exceptional public safety, economic opportunity, and quality public services in a financially responsible manner to meet and exceed the needs of our residents, visitors, and business community while maintaining our unique quality and character."

Commissioner Pearsall suggested adding staff recognition to the mission statement, proposing "to meet and exceed the needs of our staff, residents, visitors and business community." This generated discussion about whether staff inclusion belonged in the mission statement or core values.

Commissioner McDuffie suggested that employee values might better serve in core values rather than the mission statement, which should focus on the town's service purpose. Gantt explained that mission statements represent collective commitments from all town employees and board members, making staff inclusion potentially redundant since they are part of the mission's execution.

Discussion evolved around improving quality of life as the fundamental purpose. One participant suggested: "Through our every action, improve quality of life by providing exceptional public safety, economic opportunity, and quality public services… while preserving the integrity of our small town identity."

The small-town identity theme resonated as commissioners frequently reference maintaining character while managing growth. Commissioner Pearsall emphasized keeping mission statements simple and memorable, noting the current version's wordiness.

Gantt shared examples from other municipalities including Greensboro ("to shape an inclusive future for equitable economic opportunity and sustainable safe neighborhoods through resident focused services and programs"), Raleigh, Monroe, and Jacksonville, demonstrating varying approaches and lengths.

Commissioner George supported the order of "residents, employees, visitors, and business community" while maintaining existing language structure. Gantt agreed to draft sample revisions incorporating discussed concepts for future consideration.

Vision Statement Discussion

Gantt posed the question "what is Burgaw going to look like in 2035?" before presenting the current vision: "Burgaw strives to be an active, vibrant, inclusive, and engaged community focused on planned and structured growth, sustaining quality health care, supporting educational institutions, encouraging employment opportunities, all while maintaining a safe pedestrian friendly town for our diverse population."

Discussion centered on balancing development pressures with character preservation. Finance Officer Tiffany Byrd questioned how to manage extensive development along Highway 117 between Burgaw and Rocky Point while maintaining the town's identity.

Gantt noted that while the town cannot control external development, it must decide whether to grow strategically or risk being bypassed like Saint Helena, which chose not to develop infrastructure to discourage growth.

Commissioners examined examples from other municipalities including Brevard ("a safe, friendly, family oriented city with small town charm, abundant outdoor recreation, art, culture, investment opportunities, environmental conscientiousness, and economic diversity"), Monroe, and Jacksonville.

The discussion emphasized future-focused language while maintaining conciseness and memorability. Gantt agreed to incorporate feedback and provide revised samples for continued discussion.

Core Values Development

Gantt explained that Burgaw had never formally developed core values statements, typically consisting of one-word descriptions like transparency, community character, fiscal responsibility, and service excellence.

Board members suggested values including integrity, stewardship, pride, and transparency. Gantt noted transparency efforts including live-streaming board meetings and accepting written public comments for those unable to attend meetings.

Discussion touched on balancing priorities and maintaining realistic standards rather than rating everything as equally important. The conversation identified approximately five core values as typical, though longer lists were possible.

SWOT Analysis Framework

Gantt introduced the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis framework for organizing departmental presentations and strategic planning. Board members used sticky notes to identify strengths (what the town does well), weaknesses (improvement areas), opportunities (external positive factors like growth and film industry), and threats (external challenges).

The exercise aimed to align operational realities with board priorities in budget development, connecting strategic planning with financial decisions.

Strategic Planning Integration

Gantt emphasized connecting all town decisions to mission, vision, strategic plans, and core values. He questioned what services the town might discontinue, though acknowledged most current services remain essential.

The conversation highlighted ongoing policy improvements including technology integration for code enforcement, minimum housing standards, and park maintenance reporting through QR codes for immediate issue notification.

Recessed

Town Manager Gantt concluded the afternoon session noting they would continue discussions at 9:00 AM the following morning. The session would focus on reviewing sticky note feedback, establishing major management goals, strategic objectives, and developing the budget framework connecting strategic planning to specific dollar amounts.

Gantt expressed appreciation for the comprehensive discussions and emphasized the value of reviewing what makes the town great through open dialogue. He noted that department heads were welcome but not required to attend the following day's continuation, which would build upon the extensive foundation established through departmental presentations and initial strategic planning exercises.

The meeting provided substantial groundwork for budget development while highlighting consistent themes of growth management, technology advancement, infrastructure needs, and maintaining community character across all departments. The strategic planning approach aimed to ensure budget decisions align with long-term vision and community values while addressing immediate operational needs. Meeting recessed at 3:00PM.

TOWN OF BURGAW BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SPECIAL MEETING – STRATEGIC PLANNING RETREAT - DAY 2

DATE:	March 3, 2026
TIME:	9:00 AM
PLACE:	Burgaw Town Center, 108 E. Wilmington Street
BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:	Mayor Olivia Dawson, Mayor Pro-tem James Malloy, Commissioners Bill George, William Rivenbark, Michael Pearsall and Myra McDuffie

Call to Order

Mayor Oliva Dawson called the meeting to order at 9:07AM. Town Manager James Gantt opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and acknowledging that the previous day had been productive despite being long, with substantial information covered. He explained that he had worked the evening before to digitize the sticky notes from the SWOT analysis exercise into a more presentable format for the day's discussions. Gantt outlined the day's agenda, explaining they would review the SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) identified by board and staff, discuss mission, vision, and core values, and then delve into strategic planning and how it relates to budget prioritization.

Gantt emphasized the importance of prioritization, stating "everything's a priority" but noting that true prioritization requires ranking items by need, citizen input, and potential impact. He explained that the retreat was designed to establish a vision and roadmap for staff to develop the budget, with specific projects and rankings to be discussed in future budget meetings. He distinguished between projects that require funding and those that can be accomplished through operational changes at minimal cost.

Discussion of the SWAT Analysis

Gantt began by explaining that the SWOT analysis helps guide strategic planning, inform budget priorities, identify policy focus areas, align board and staff understanding, and prepare for future risks. He presented word clouds showing the most frequently mentioned terms from the previous day's exercise, with "town staff," "employees," "technology," and "teamwork" being the most prominent strengths identified.

For weaknesses, "limited," "growth," "infrastructure," "communication," and "lack" appeared most frequently. Gantt noted that growth appeared across multiple categories - as both a weakness and opportunity, and potentially as a threat, illustrating the complex nature of managing growth.

SWOT Analysis Review

Strengths: The comprehensive list included personnel/employees, technology, teamwork, training and development, equality and fairness, strong staff, good team communication, vision, proactive thinking, approachability, desire to improve, leadership management, interdepartmental cooperation, variety of services, staff availability to citizens, first responders, visibility around town, family-oriented activities, care about town, keeping up with technology, culture, and available water/wastewater capacity.

Weaknesses: The identified challenges included aging infrastructure, limited availability for town infrastructure growth, budget constraints, lack of execution, small size, communication issues, reacting without research, community involvement concerns, fast uncontrolled growth, lack of available real property, local political issues, water cutoff policy concerns, contractor debris policy, preparation for large expenditures, white goods convenience site curb appeal, limited tax base, accountability, funding constraints, administrative/employee relationships, staffing needs, lack of strategic plan direction, and water/sewer infrastructure needs.

Commissioner Michael Pearsall expressed interest in understanding the reasoning behind some of the listed weaknesses, stating there would be "good to explain" the thought processes behind items like the contractor debris pickup policy. The board engaged in discussion about debris pickup policies, with clarification that the town doesn't pick up contractor debris from commercial projects but does handle limited amounts from homeowner projects. Gantt explained that while they handle mattresses and white goods, they address dumping issues on a case-by-case basis, prioritizing keeping the town clean while working to identify violators when possible.

Regarding the water cutoff policy, Gantt defended the current approach as standard statewide practice that follows state law, explaining that they work with residents to establish payment arrangements and provide resources for financial assistance when needed. He noted that stricter policies prevent residents from accumulating unmanageable debt.

Pearsall contributed insight about community involvement and reacting without research, referencing ongoing discussions about stop signs and emphasizing the importance of gathering community input before making decisions that affect neighborhoods. He suggested more thorough research and community engagement, stating "getting the community more involved" is crucial since "everything I see up there seems like it was reported by someone from the community too."

Opportunities: The board identified training, private partnerships, population growth, providing better streets and pavement, desired location growth, increased service demands, business development, economic development, filming, tourism, ability to grow, influence change, controlled growth to maintain town identity, business growth, downtown development including second-floor apartments, and the film industry.

Threats: External risks included other employers, overgrowth, greed for tax dollars, civil unrest, NIMBYism (not in my backyard mentality), increased service demands, IT concerns, cybersecurity, laziness, "it will not happen here" mentality, unmanaged growth, lack of citizen involvement, infrastructure challenges, traffic, vandalism, flooding, funding concerns, financial well-being, growth opposition, local county politics, and flooding.

Commissioner Bill George raised specific concerns about traffic and parking, reflecting on how downtown parking has become increasingly scarce compared to earlier decades. He expressed concern about the impact on local businesses, noting that customers might have to "park at Rocky Point to get to Burgaw." The discussion revealed the complexity of potential solutions, including parking decks, timed parking, and paid parking, with Gantt explaining the challenges and costs associated with each option.

Mayor Olivia Dawson emphasized the need for strategic planning around parking, referencing previous discussions about railroad bed parking and the need to "sit down and be more strategic about it." The conversation touched on employee parking policies for downtown businesses and the ongoing courthouse parking coordination efforts.

The board discussed various infrastructure threats, with Commissioner James Malloy noting concerns about sewer capacity limitations affecting neighboring Brunswick County, where development has been halted due to state-required capacity allocations. Gantt explained Burgaw's current sewer capacity of 1.25 million gallons per day with current flow of approximately 400,000 gallons daily, indicating substantial available capacity.

Discussion of the Mission Statement

Gantt presented the existing mission statement: "Through our every action, provide exceptional public safety, economic opportunity, and quality public services in a fiscally responsible manner to meet and exceed the needs of our residents, visitors, and business community, while maintaining our unique quality and character."

He offered three simplified alternatives:

Option 1: "To provide exceptional public safety, quality services and economic opportunity in a fiscally responsible manner while preserving our community's unique character."

Option 2: "To deliver safe, reliable services and economic opportunity while responsibly stewarding public resources and preserving our community's character."

Option 3: "To serve our residents, businesses, and visitors by providing safe, high quality services, supporting economic growth, and protecting the character of our community through responsible governance."

After brief discussion, the board unanimously selected Option 3, with Gantt explaining that this mission statement represents what staff strives to accomplish daily in serving the community.

Discussion of the Vision Statement

Gantt explained that a vision statement describes what the community aspires to become in the future, reflecting long-term goals and aspirations while inspiring officials and the community and guiding strategic planning and policy decisions. He noted that when the original vision was developed, it incorporated considerations of the hospital and healthcare quality, educational institutions, and the community's aging population. The current Vision Statement is that "Burgaw strives to be an active, vibrant, inclusive, and engaged community, focusing on planned and structured growth, sustaining quality healthcare, supporting educational institutions, encouraging employment opportunities, all while maintaining a safe, pedestrian friendly town for our diverse population".

He presented four vision options:

Option 1: "To be a vibrant, inclusive community that embraces thoughtful growth while remaining safe, walkable, and full of opportunity."

Option 2: "A thriving, inclusive town that grows responsibly while preserving safety, opportunity, and quality of life."

Option 3: "To become a thriving, engaged community that balances responsible growth with a safe, welcoming, and opportunity-rich environment."

Option 4: "To be a safe, walkable, and inclusive town that supports smart growth, strong schools, quality healthcare, and economic opportunity."

Commissioner George reflected on changes over time, remembering when he had to parallel park on Courthouse Avenue when it was two lanes during his driver's license test. The discussion evolved around creating a vision that captures both the town's historic charm and its future aspirations.

Commissioner Myra McDuffie suggested combining elements, with the board agreeing to the final vision statement: "To become a thriving, safe, walkable, inclusive town that supports and balances responsible growth, strong schools, quality healthcare, and economic opportunity."

Discussion of Core Values

Gantt presented a draft list of core values developed from the previous day's discussions, including definitions for each:

Integrity: We act honestly, ethically, and transparently in all decisions and interactions. **Accountability:** We take responsibility for our actions and remain answerable to the public we serve. **Stewardship:** We practice fiscal discipline and long-term planning to responsibly manage public resources and protect the town's future. **Excellence in Infrastructure:** We are committed to maintaining sound infrastructure that supports public safety, service delivery, and sustainable growth. **Community Character:** We preserve Burgaw's unique identity while fostering pride and engagement throughout our community. **Balance**: We make thoughtful, measure decision that balance growth, service demands, and quality of life. **Steadfast Service:** We remain dependable, consistent, and committed in serving our residents, businesses, and visitors. **People and Professionalism:** We value our employees, invest in their development, and foster a respectful workplace that empowers them to serve our community effectively.

The board engaged in detailed discussion about refining these values. Some commissioners expressed concern about terms like "stewardship" and "steadfast service" having religious connotations. George suggested that accountability and good stewardship naturally align, and that professionalism encompasses good service delivery.

Malloy appreciated the comprehensive nature but questioned whether all seven values were necessary, suggesting that some concepts overlapped. The discussion focused on consolidating similar concepts while retaining the essential elements.

Regarding "Excellence in Infrastructure," several board members questioned whether this was achievable given current infrastructure conditions. Gantt suggested "reliability" as an alternative, leading to the revision: "We are committed to maintaining sound, reliable infrastructure that supports public safety, service delivery, and sustainable growth."

The board discussed "Community Character," with Pearsall suggesting the addition of "charm" to capture Burgaw's unique appeal. Mayor Dawson supported this addition, leading to refinement of this value.

After extensive discussion, the board refined the core values to focus on the most essential elements while avoiding redundancy and ensuring achievable standards. The core values agreed upon were: Integrity, Accountability, Excellence, Community Character & Charm, Professionalism, and Unity

Discussion of Strategic Planning

Following a break, Gantt introduced the strategic planning segment, noting that he, Mayor Dawson, Commissioner McDuffie, Commissioner Malloy, and staff member Bri Willman had attended a strategic planning workshop where they learned from other municipalities' approaches.

Strategic Plan Framework

Gantt explained that a strategic plan establishes the board's key priorities and provides a clear roadmap for guiding policy, budgeting, and operations. It aligns daily decision-making with the town's mission and vision to ensure responsible governance, community well-being, economic strength, and reliable public services.

He presented the town's existing five strategic goals that have been used in budget development since approximately 2020:

1. High Performing Government (proposed change to "Organizational Excellence"): We will maintain a commitment to and support an adequate and well-trained staff to serve current and future community needs of the community, to cooperate regionally and with other local governments and, where appropriate, share ideas and resources, and conduct the business of the with complete transparency and integrity.

2. Healthy and Engaged Community: We will promote the overall well-being of our residents and visitors with welcoming public spaces, high-quality recreational facilities, and cultural activities that fulfill a range of our community's needs and to work with advisory boards as a means to encourage citizen participation.

3. Environmental Leadership and Responsible Development: We will be good stewards of the natural environment through planned stormwater and floodplain management efforts and by planning our built environment in a way that respects and preserves natural resources and the small-town character of our community.

4. Safe Community and Reliable Infrastructure: We will provide a safe, dynamic, and attractive community for people of all ages, continue to address the changing demographic composition of the town, we will ensure safe neighborhoods through proactive professional, and engaged public safety services, and we will provide safe drinking water and quality treatment of wastewater through maintenance and expansion of current systems.

5. Economic Vitality: We will employ sound fiscal management practices to ensure long-term financial viability of the town by building partnerships to create a supportive environment for current businesses and form relationships that foster new and continued economic opportunities in Burgaw.

Strategic Planning Workshop Insights

Commissioner McDuffie praised Gantt's work, explaining that attending the New Bern workshop revealed that "James has done a phenomenal job getting a strategic plan in order without any leadership or guidance from the board." She emphasized that the workshop showed Gantt had already implemented what they learned municipalities should be doing, stating "he had already had those things in place."

McDuffie stressed that the board didn't need to "reinvent the wheel" because the foundation was solid, but rather needed to "fill in the blanks" and "narrow it down to those main categories." She noted how her perspective changed from being a resident to serving as an elected official, emphasizing the importance of board unity and speaking with the same informed voice.

Commissioner Pearsall echoed these sentiments, acknowledging the challenge of leading without guidance while facing public criticism. He emphasized the value of the educational opportunities available to commissioners and the importance of maturity in handling differences of opinion while maintaining respect for one another.

Commissioner Malloy reflected on the progress made since he joined the board, emphasizing the importance of unity and commitment to working together for Burgaw's benefit. He stressed that serving requires accountability and doing what's right, not necessarily what individuals want to do.

Budget Integration and Prioritization

Gantt explained how every budget item, especially capital items, must be associated with one of the five strategic goals. If an item cannot be connected to a strategic goal, staff questions whether it's truly needed or should be funded. This system has guided budget development for several years.

He noted that the town's five categories encompassed all ten sample focus areas provided in their strategic planning workshop materials, indicating comprehensive coverage of municipal responsibilities.

Board Priorities and Goals

Gantt solicited specific priorities from board members to guide budget development:

Information Technology and Police Systems: Commissioner Pearsall emphasized IT infrastructure and police department software needs. Gantt explained the current system using Southern Software's police pack RMS (Records Management System) and the planned transition to Zuercher systems used by the county. This upgrade would provide enhanced functionality including CAD systems with mapping capabilities, improved report writing through copy-paste functionality, and better officer safety features. The estimated cost for RMS system transition was $50,000 with annual subscriptions around $15,000-20,000.

Infrastructure Priorities: Commissioner Malloy emphasized infrastructure as a top priority, stating "Infrastructure must be ahead" because of anticipated growth that "we're not gonna be able to stop." He also prioritized personnel retention and competitive compensation, noting competition from surrounding counties and the sheriff's department.

Road Improvements: Commissioner Rivenbark stressed the need for increased road paving funding, acknowledging progress made but emphasizing the need for more resources to address neighborhood streets. He noted the cost escalation from delaying projects and expressed concern to potential tax increases and that residents need to see infrastructure improvements, stating "I'm on the fence again this year because our residents need to see infrastructure taken care of."

Stormwater Management: The board discussed flooding concerns and the nearly complete stormwater master plan. Gantt explained that while Burgaw experiences localized flooding during heavy rains, water typically recedes within 20-30 minutes, indicating the system functions but can be improved. The master plan identifies 18 miles of storm pipes and provides a roadmap for systematic improvements through regular maintenance and strategic upgrades.

Revenue Enhancement Discussion: The conversation expanded to revenue generation. Gantt explained that municipalities cannot independently raise sales tax rates - only counties can increase local sales tax. Pender County currently has 6.75% sales tax compared to New Hanover County's 7%. The town receives approximately $2 million annually in sales tax revenue, nearly matching ad valorem tax receipts.

The board discussed the upcoming property revaluation and its impact on tax policy. Gantt explained the legal requirement to publish a revenue-neutral rate and expressed his opinion that the board should adopt "slightly above" the revenue-neutral rate to maintain service capacity while managing growth-related expenses.

Land Acquisition: The board identified land acquisition as a priority, specifically discussing the golf course property. Gantt suggested focusing on stormwater management benefits rather than purely recreational purposes, as this provides stronger legal authority for property acquisition. He noted potential deed restrictions requiring golf course use and committed to researching these limitations.

Communication and Transparency: Mayor Dawson emphasized organizational excellence priorities including systems, programs, training, resources, personnel compensation, and communication. The board discussed ongoing transparency initiatives including the SeeClickFix system for public requests and project dashboards for tracking funded projects.

Economic Development: The discussion touched on strategic business attraction, with Gantt expressing preference for niche businesses like Burgaw Brewing and Patti's Place over big-box retailers. Mayor Dawson identified hotel development as a priority, noting the need for visitor accommodations. The board emphasized attracting medical facilities and professional services to reduce residents' travel to Wilmington for basic services.

Growth Management: Finance Officer Tiffany Byrd emphasized preparing for anticipated growth, asking about revenue generation strategies and ordinance enforcement, particularly regarding stormwater retention ponds and development requirements.

The board acknowledged the challenges and opportunities presented by growth, with Gantt explaining that while growth brings increased service demands, it also provides expanded tax base that can reduce per-capita costs for municipal services. He used the analogy of sharing a restaurant bill among more people to illustrate how increased population can reduce individual tax burden while maintaining service levels.

The meeting concluded with appreciation expressed by Commissioner George acknowledging the collective efforts of board members and staff in Burgaw's progress and development.

Adjournment

The meeting concluded with expressions of appreciation for the collaborative process and acknowledgment of the progress made in strategic planning discussions, with plans to incorporate the developed framework into upcoming budget deliberations. The meeting adjourned at 12:15PM.